United Nations A/HRC/38/NGO/81

General Assembly

Distr.: General
11 June 2018

English only

Human Rights Council
Thirty-eighth session
18 June-6 July 2018
Agenda item 3
Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Al-Khoei Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.18-09467(E)
1809467

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Al-Khoei Foundation written statement to the Human Rights Council's 38th Session, June 2018

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Al-Khoei Foundation is an international charitable organization, founded in 1989 by the late Shia Muslim spiritual leader Ayatollah Al-Khoei, which has been in General Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council since 1998. The Foundation works towards the promotion of equality, tolerance, respect and justice for all groups and minorities worldwide, and actively supports all initiatives that foster peaceful co-existence and friendship between different religious and non-religious groups.

We work at the local, national and international levels for the education and welfare of the Muslim community and initiate various projects that promote the empowerment of women and youth. Alongside this, the Foundation aims to highlight issues that pose a severe threat to human rights with the help of our network of activists and community workers.

The increasing number of human right violations is a global crisis and demands the world leaders to take necessary actions to end inhumane practises and it is our aim to draw attention to these issues that are a hindrance to human development.

Pakistan (Enforced Disappearances and the mainstreaming of religious extremist Groups)

In recent years, there has been a significant decline in suicide bombing and terrorism related events in Pakistan, but the enforced disappearances of activists and journalists and the mainstreaming of religious extremist groups with its subsequent negative impact on minorities, are the major concerns. In late 2017, Islamabad, the country's capital, a group of radical religious forces demanded the complete exclusion of Ahmadiyya believers from government offices and the death penalty for those who were imprisoned or booked under blasphemy cases.

A major concern is the rise of enforced disappearances by state security forces and secret intelligence agencies. Both 2017 and 2018 began with enforced disappearances of peace activists, bloggers, human rights activists, journalists and nationalists, in particular Baloch and Sindhi activists were targeted.

Shias are once again in the grip of violence mostly led by state. In recent years, the modus operandi of killing Shias was through targeted killings and suicide attacks, however since 2017 a new trend has emerged where Shia activists and laymen have disappeared. Subsequently the number of Shia missing persons has exponentially increased, without explanation from the relevant authorities.

Child sexual abuse has emerged as another alarming phenomenon. After significant media coverage in 2015 regarding the prevalence of gang organised abuse of children, including the filming of child pornography, rape and murder occurring in Kasur, the number of cases reported has increased subsequently in Sindh, KPK and Punjab.

Afghanistan (Cooperation between the armed groups against Shias)

Shia Muslims particularly the Hazaras in Afghanistan make up around 9% of the population and are constantly being targeted by the extremist1 groups.

The history of these militant attacks and human rights violations against Shia Muslims in Afghanistan are not a new phenomenon. Shias have faced violence during the Taliban rule in 1996-2001, but in recent years such attacks have further intensified after the emergence of Islamic state. Taliban and Islamic state have joined hands together to target Shias and have declared a war against them2.

On August 5, 2017, in a most barbaric attack in a village of a remote district of Sar-e-Pul province, hugely populated by Hazara Shias, ISIS and Taliban jointly attacked and slaughtered more than 60 people including women, children and elderly men. At least 150 families were taken as hostages. It was deemed 'a rare cooperation between the armed groups'. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani declared it a 'war crime'.

1http://www.dw.com/en/why-is-islamic-state-targeting-shiites-in-afghanistan/a-41958793

2http://www.huffingtonpost.in/syed-zafar-mehdi/why-isis-have-declared-war-on-the-hazara-shias-of-afghanistan_a_22504421/

On 16th June 2017, Masjid AlZahra, a Shia mosque, which had been a target of militants in the past, was once again hit by a devastating suicide attack that killed at least 6 people, with many severely injured. ISIS claimed the responsibility. Every Ashura, Shia fears rise. Under the Taliban rule, traditional Shia Ashura processions were completely banned. With the rise of ISIS, sectarian bloodletting has escalated, and this unholy alliance with the Taliban has put the Hazara Shias in immediate risk. With sectarian tensions rising, the threat to the regional stability and world peace rises day by day.

IDPs in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic

Internal displacements in Iraq and Syria are a major issue after the expulsion of ISIS. It is estimated that just under 3 million people3 are internally displaced in Iraq, including vulnerable women and children. As such the need for shelter, food and protection of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) is crucial.

Our Al-Kawthar project has been one of the forefront groups working in Iraq to assist and relocate IDPs, in particular widows and orphans affected by this internal turmoil. However given the large scale reconstruction project of Iraq that must be undertaken, it is clear that it is a necessity for there to be a collaborative effort from the international community in order to achieve this.

An even more desperate situation is the IDP crisis in Syria, with a number of almost 6.1 million people displaced, of which half are children. There is an absolute need for these displaced persons to receive access to healthcare, education, basic living conditions. With the current absence of a permanent solution to the crisis, anxiety grows larger and larger amongst the IDPs.

Treatment of Shia Muslims in Nigeria

Nigeria has continued to witness eruption and an increase of violence against religious and non-religious citizens. The Nigerian government still fails to protect its citizens from state and non-state human rights abuse.

Militant organisation Boko Haram has been the most dangerous and barbarous outfit and remain involved in heinous crimes against humanity especially against minorities. In the year 2016, the Human Rights Watch reported that 550 civilians died in attacks conducted by the outfit. Amnesty International, in it's country report on Nigeria, identified that due to Boko Haram related incidents nearly 14.8 million people were affected4.

The number of IDPs radically increased reaching up to 2 million, with 20 per cent remain living in refugee camps. IDPs are reported to face malnutrition, and lack of healthy food and water. In the Bama district, it is reported that 1200 died in camps due to inadequate health facilities.

Although security forces had little success in pushing out Boko Haram from its strongholds, human rights abuse, by the military are alarming and rampant. In 2017, more than 750 men were arrested on mere suspicion of being Boko Haram members. At least 240 detainees died in prison due to mistreatment and inadequate facilities in prison.

The rise of torture, extrajudicial killing and persecution of Shias by security forces is harrowing. As one of the country's significant minorities, Shias have continued to face both Boko Haram-led and state-sponsored violence including the killing of 347 Shia believers Kaduna province at the hands of the Nigerian army. In addition, Shias continue to be deprived of their basic freedoms including their right to practice faith, as Muharram processions, a significant tradition in Shia Islam, have been restricted in different provinces such as Katsina, Kebbi, Kano, and Jigawa.

The harassment of journalists, activists and civil society members continued throughout the year of 2017. It is alarming to see that freedom of expression is being curbed through legislation by passing undemocratic laws which prohibit individuals to exercise their basic right for assembly and opposition.

Humanitarian crises in Yemen and the coalition forces

Yemen, often described as a major human catastrophe, with thousands of civilian casualties. Addressing the Security Council, UN aid chief declared that Yemen is facing largest famine the world has seen for decades. A report suggests that more than 17 million people in Yemen are the victims of food shortage. The spread of cholera has also risen, and therefore these multiple challenges need immediate attention and assistance.

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3 IDMC Global Report 2018

4 *Amnesty International*, Nigeria 2016/17. Online Access https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/nigeria/report-nigeria/

To exacerbate sufferings of people further, the coalition powers have restrained the aid and put restrictions on the means of bringing aid into Yemen. According to Amnesty International, the coalition forces bombed the hospitals, schools, civilian residential areas, places of worship and committed war crimes.

Rohingya Muslims

Armed conflict between military and different ethnic groups has further deteriorated and spread into Kachin, Rakhine, Karen, and Northern Shan States. Government forces have disproportionally used violence against ethnic groups, destroyed properties, raped, extrajudicial killings and forced detentions.
Ongoing ethnic cleansing against Rohingya Muslims, which began in 2012, has intensified and resulted in thousands of people displaced. Since Rohingya are not recognised as an ethnicity, and many of them have had citizenship denied, it has therefore led to further exploitation.
International Organisations have termed Rohingya crisis as a most serious and pressing issue that needs to be settled immediately. It is reported that Rohingya Muslims lack basic necessities including food and water in camps which are set up Rakhine State. Moreover Myanmar government has barred international humanitarian organisations for relief work escalating the situation.
Another threat, that could greatly intensify the violence, is the repatriating agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh government, which would send 77,000 Rohingya Muslims back to Myanmar. The fear amongst refugees is that returning to camps means returning to the same army which carried out those crimes against them.

Tackling hate curriculum

In today's world of intolerance and prevailing extremism, curriculum based on discrimination and hate adds to the violent trends. In most countries, hate and discriminatory material is introduced through curriculum in text books. In Pakistan, there are multiple examples of hate material in text books that prompts violence against religious and ethnic minorities. This method of propagating discrimination is found in many other countries.
Freedom of religion is crucial for human development. Similarly the change in curriculum is of utmost importance and will decide the future of world's peace.
To replace intolerance with tolerance and violence with harmony, curriculum change is desperately needed. Any material based on bigotry, bias, prejudice, inequality, that teaches intolerance towards any faith, ethnicity, race or colour should be eliminated. To promote the values of equality, harmony and peace, curriculum based on religious freedom, human values should be inculcated and taught.
The Al-Khoei Foundation has been working with numerous interfaith groups and likeminded organisations in order to promote religious tolerance, and to further efforts to end discrimination and prejudice that remains on an international scale to this day.

Conclusion

Persecution of, and intolerance towards minority faiths, cultures and ethnicities continues to be a grave problem on a global scale. In particular, with the rise of anti-Shia sentiment, we believe it is therefore crucial that the resulting crimes and atrocities that Shia have faced need to be recognised, highlighted and tackled. It is through our work at Al-Khoei Foundation that we have aimed to do so, with our various inter and intrafaith projects, outreach programmes and events, that exist on an international scale.

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